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ABSTRACT

Attaining good public relations may be the most important and most difficult job facing a school board. To meet this problem, a communications expert should be hired at the assistant superintendent level to develop and implement a communications plan. This expert should hold strong credentials and be recruited and hired directly by the superintendent and school board. Given free reign, the communications expert should conduct extensive interviews with the entire school staff to gain the information necessary for development of a program to create an openness between school and public. The program must be based on school board policies that encourage increasing quality of the school district. (DW)

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HOW TO ATTAIN GOOD PUBLIC RELATIONS IN YOUR DISTRICT?

Clinic C-33
Robert McHenry, Chairperson

Attaining good public relations in a school district is not only, in my opinion, necessary, but perhaps the most difficult job which faces any Board of Directors. In this day and age, particularly in a district where the specter of white flight looms, it is absolutely necessary that the public be informed, not only as to what the school program is, but of its plans for the future, and without public input, the school district is not only without vital planning information, but is setting itself up for the legitimate complaint that it cares little or nothing for public opinion and needs.

We in Little Rock are proud that we have an integrated system, a system which we feel to be beneficial to all the students, and a system which we must work toward the equal education of all students.

In Little Rock, Arkansas, the black-white population ratio is approximately 70% white to 30% black; however, with the advent of cross-town busing, and a complete integration of all grades (one through twelve), we have experienced a declining white school population along with an increasing black enrollment. The overall school black and white ratio is approximately 50%-50%. Thus, you see dramatized the "white flight" syndrome which has plagued so many of our urban areas. Quite frankly, we are proud that this situation has begun to stabilize, and we feel as if we have at least slowed the flight, and I believe that the slowing has been accomplished at least partially by the Board and Administration's willingness to respond honestly to the patrons concerning district problems; however, this openness and,

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what I believe to be, an excellent program for all of the students, has not been nearly enough. We have failed to completely stop a public reaction which could utterly destroy the public schools in our city, and would, in my opinion, horribly damage the City of Little Rock itself. Certainly, any district can and should improve its curriculum, its teachers, its administration, its board, and all other aspects of public education, but as I have said before, I think my district does offer the best education available in the Little Rock area. Why then have we continued to lose white middle-class children? One element is that there are disciplinary problems within our district, and there has been in the past and still exists, some black-white confrontation, but I believe, and my belief is based upon actual observation in the schools, that while we must continue to work for and obtain an atmosphere which is always conducive to learning, the disciplinary problems are not nearly as bad as the public believes. Therefore, we have failed to inform the public about: (1) the good program available in our public schools; (2) the availability of the educational process for all children; and (3) the needs, problems, and benefits in our system. Coupled with this failure is the equally important failure to learn of the needs, concerns and legitimate problems of the public (including students, patrons, and teachers).

A quick example on the need, failure, and method of approach can be found in our experience with the elementary schools at the beginning of the 1974-1975 school year. We feared and rightfully so, an exodus of white middle-class children from our elementary schools; we felt that such an exodus would be caused primarily by fear and misunderstanding and not by failure to provide a good elementary education. One school in particular had experienced a loss of white middle-class children;

the parents, both black and white, took it upon themselves to alleviate the fears and meet the questions of their fellow patrons. The Parent Teacher Association, in cooperation with the principal and teachers of that elementary school, arranged a meeting for all interested patrons and/or potential patrons. We welcomed persons now within the public schools, those not in the public schools, and those who thought they might return to the public schools. School Board members were invited, and along with the principal and patrons, presented "our case" to those attending. Prior to the meeting, which brought probably one hundred undecided parents, the public school patrons had done their homework; these parents had worked their neighborhood by telephone calls and door-to-door knocking and most of the prospective patrons had been approached. Further, after the meeting, these parents continued their one-on-one presentation to the undecided parents. As a result, the trend in that school was reversed; certainly, there was no complete turn around, but also just as certain, white children began and are still returning to Forest Park School, where they have found an excellent educational opportunity.

A similar program was attempted in the other elementary schools in the Little Rock system; however, it was not as effective because it lacked organization and enthusiasm. There was no failure of the patrons, but we failed to set up an organization which would seek out prospective students and more importantly, we failed to inspire in our principals and teachers at the various elementary schools an enthusiasm needed to accomplish this job. Consequently, all to often, we approached the program as "just another meeting which we had to set up and attend." The blame for this lackadaisical attitude is of no importance, but what is of

importance is that our district was not prepared at that time for an all out communications program, and for this reason, we suffered severe damage.

The question then becomes: How does the district not only stop this damage but begin an affirmative program? I feel very strongly that the first item on the agenda is to establish a communications department, hire a communications expert, and place that communications expert in a cabinet position to the superintendent. This person's qualifications and abilities should demand a salary in the range of the other assistant superintendents, and he or she should be given the overall assignment of developing and implementing a communications plan for the district.

Merely stating that a "communications plan" should be designed and implemented says nothing, of course, but you must ask the question: What is a communications plan?

There is, of course, no single plan, and the outline of a plan which I am suggesting here is merely that -- an outline. I have said little concerning the best public relations of all and that is of the well-trained student, the enthusiastic teacher, and the school volunteer. These people make our school system and therefore, are our best public relations people, but it is my opinion that a plan such as I am suggesting (or any similar plan) will not only more effectively organize such public oriented people and activities, but will instill in all concerned the need for communications between government and its patrons.

A school district of 20,000 students or more should employ a communications expert with sufficient background and ability to understand the problems of the school district, its students, employees and patrons. It is a simple matter to make

this statement and very difficult to find the right person. I recommend to you that vigor and commitment to the public school concept are essential elements to this employee.

I believe that the search for this person should be handled at the very top level of the school district. There must be no delegation of authority in selecting this person; the superintendent must actively recruit and interview, and in my opinion (although not shared by many of my own Board), the School Board itself should have an active part in the selection of the final candidate.

Once the selection is made, the communicator should be given a free reign to study the system, interview and interrogate all of its employees (including the superintendent and the assistant superintendents); this interrogation should not stop with the administration or professional staff but must include the Board itself, students, clerical, custodial and maintenance staff. With the information learned from such study, the director of communications should submit to the superintendent and the Board a communications program for the district. As in the superintendent's job performance, the superintendent and the Board should give the director of communications great leeway to perform his duties, requiring primarily that the bottom line be a better relationship with the community and the district, and in my particular instance, a cessation of white flight. Of course, no communications expert can accomplish this task overnight, nor can it be accomplished at all without an extraordinarily good school program with the attending requirements of good behavior and academic freedom. A good communications program will not sell what's not there; in fact, we must explain and comment on deficiencies as well as plusses. The Administration and the

Board will be called upon to increase the quality of the district, and will be stimulated to better personal performance.

With regard to the program itself, I do not feel that the superintendent or the Board should set it up; it should be tailored to fit the policies enacted by the School Board, and should provide an openness between the school district and its patrons which will inspire confidence each for the other.

I am aware, as I have attempted to indicate in this paper, that all the ills of a school district can not be satisfied by hiring a communications director or establishing a communications department in a school district, and I am aware in smaller districts that the communications director must double either as a superintendent, board member, or other employee of the district; I am also aware that regardless of the ability of a director or communicator, that the entire staff and board must be dedicated to the concept of opening our district to its patrons.

It is vital, however, than our schools become public schools in the true sense of the word, and in order for this publicness to be achieved, we must cast off the security of secrecy and the blanket of pseudo professionalism behind which all to often technicians and lazy boards hide. We must open our schools to inspection by our professional staff and our patrons. It is now, and will always be, the obligation of the Board to make the policies and the superintendent and his staff to recommend and enforce that policy; the buck stops with the Board and the opinion of the various communities can not be substituted for the Board's judgment (no more than a superintendent's judgment controls the Board's collective judgment), but we as school officials, or for that matter, any type of public officials,

can not, and must not again, act without the knowledge of the needs of the public, and to obtain this knowledge, we must inform the public of our activities and discover from it its varying needs.